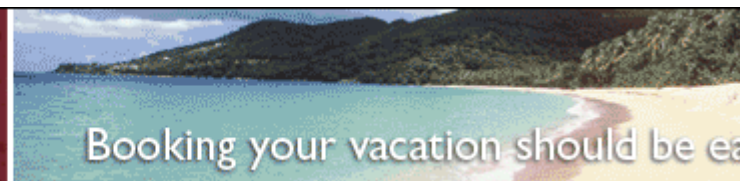


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## Tough work, low prices milking state's dairy industry of its farmers

Associated Press

ELIZABETHTOWN, Ky. -- Much like tobacco farmers, the ranks of dairy farmers in Kentucky are shrinking.

In 1985, more than 6,000 dairy farmers were operating in the state. Last year, the Kentucky Milk Program counted fewer than 1,300.

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operations. So neighbors complain, especially those who have moved to the country but aren't prepared for realities of country living.

Then there's the demanding nature of the work.

Shepherd recalls being in college and waking up at 3 a.m. to milk. His parents worried about the dark circles that formed under his eyes.

"I've got a lot of appreciation for these guys," he said. "You just can't say, 'Well, we're going on vacation cows, take a week off.' "

"I think it's going to continue," said Doug Shepherd, a Hardin County livestock extension agent.

Shepherd said farmers point to too many regulations, stagnant milk prices, lack of a dependable work force and complaining neighbors.

Dairy farms can stink, sometimes for miles. Cows are more confined than with beef



The all-consuming nature of the work is the reason dairy farmer Calvin Keplinger's son, Brian, wants to get out of farming and work in a local auto parts factory instead.

"You've got to be here 24/7," he said.

Farmers also said the dairy industry was hurt by a federal government buyout program enacted in the late 1980s to cap an overproduction of milk.

Joseph Mobley of Hardin County got out then. Mobley was in his 60s and milking about 80 cows when he took the buyout.

He said he doesn't regret the decision, even though he had been milking since he was old enough to carry a bucket.

Some dairy farmers, though, are hoping to save the industry and are focusing on young farmers like Brian Keplinger. The new Kentucky Dairy Development Council, which is scheduled to meet for the first time Feb. 28 in Cave City, is aimed at revitalizing the industry.

"It's like any other part of agriculture," said Glendale dairy farmer Larry Jagers. "If you've got the love and the desire, yes, you can make a go of it."

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